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## CLINTON'S RED HERRING: THE ACCUSATIONS OF CONGRESSIONAL ISOLATIONISM

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### INTRODUCTION

For weeks now the Clinton Administration has been trying to change the subject in foreign affairs. After two and a half years of the poorest foreign policy performance since Jimmy Carter's presidency, the Clinton Administration now claims that it is the new majority in Congress that is damaging America's place and image in the world. Congressional efforts to reorganize the State Department, curb wasteful development assistance, and prevent the United States from participating in failure-prone United Nations peacekeeping missions have been portrayed by the President as a "frontal assault" on presidential authority and as the "most isolationist proposals in 50 years."

The American people should not be fooled by either Bill Clinton's internationalist rhetoric or by his accusations against the congressional majority. His rhetoric masks actions that are potentially far more isolationist in their consequences than anything proposed by Members of Congress. Clinton's foreign, defense, and trade policies reflect both a dangerous inconsistency and the lack of any coherent national strategy. They are dramatically weakening America's capability to project military power overseas, undermining U.S. alliances, inflaming protectionist sentiments at home and abroad, and squandering America's credibility. If present trends continue, America's influence in the world will shrink, and U.S. friends and allies will be faced with the slow-motion disengagement of the United States from its overseas commitments—isolationism not by design, but by default. In the words of National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, this is a policy of "back-door isolationism."

## CLINTON VS. CONGRESS: THE PRESIDENT'S "BACK-DOOR ISOLATIONISTS"

The Clinton Administration's charges of congressional isolationism began a few weeks ago in response to a bid by House and Senate Republicans to reorganize the State Department and trim foreign aid. A bill proposed by Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) would abolish the Agency for International Development (AID), the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), and other foreign policy agencies. A House bill, the American Overseas Interests Act, which has passed the International Affairs Committee but awaits a floor vote, would eliminate these agencies and cut \$2.8 billion from the \$21.6 billion foreign affairs budget proposed by the Administration. This amounts to a 13 percent reduction. Another House bill, the National Security Revitalization Act, would restrict U.S. participation in U.N. peacekeeping operations. Part of the GOP's Contract with America, this bill has been approved by the House.

Lake professes alarm. He warned in a speech on April 27 at the National Press Club that "The United States could be on the brink of unilateral disarmament."<sup>1</sup> America's success in the world, Lake charges, "is under attack by new isolationists from both the left and the right.... Our policy of engagement in world affairs is under siege and American leadership is in peril." People who hold these views are "back-door isolationists" who refuse to provide the tools for engagement, which to Lake means primarily foreign aid and joining U.N. peacekeeping operations. Apparently persuaded by these views, President Clinton has threatened to veto the House foreign affairs bills. A vote scheduled for May 24 was postponed until after the Memorial Day recess primarily because the House leadership did not have enough time to stage votes on the over 100 amendments that were proposed.

Congressional Republicans have many motivations, but not "back-door" isolationism. First, they want to adjust America's foreign policy apparatus to a new era. The Arms Control and Disarmament Agency is a creature of U.S.-Soviet arms control agreements and should be abolished. So, too, should the Agency for International Development, which purports to help developing nations but in reality has failed abysmally in promoting economic growth and development. There is no place for these agencies in an era in which the Soviet Union no longer exists and the free market and trade, not foreign aid, are the engines of economic development.

Second, congressional Republicans are trying to balance the budget. At a time when the American people are being asked to tighten their belts, why should foreign aid programs be spared from cuts? Why should AID be spending \$2 million to study ecotourism in Central America while senior citizens are asked to accept cutbacks in Medicare? Why should AID be spending \$12 million to develop the "sustainable growth" of Oman's fishing industry? And why should AID have a contract with a group called Development Associates, Inc., to study AID's own project evaluation studies? Former Secretary of State James Baker is right when he says that "AID's only useful purpose is to serve as a standard for inefficiency for other agencies to avoid."<sup>2</sup>

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1 Federal News Service, "Remarks by Anthony Lake to the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the Bretton Woods Committee," National Press Club, April 27, 1995.

2 Juan J. Walte and Marilyn Greene, "Critics queasy over plans to scale back U.S. policy," *USA Today*, May 23, 1995.

By themselves, Congress's proposed reductions in foreign aid should have no effect on U.S. credibility or commitments abroad. Most foreign aid, in fact, is spared from the budget ax. The most valuable part of the U.S. foreign aid program—the part that demonstrates America's commitment to its most important interests—will not be touched. This includes aid to Egypt and Israel, plus U.S. security assistance. Only demonstrated failures—such as bilateral development assistance and contributions to the wasteful and inefficient World Bank and International Monetary Fund—will be affected. These congressional proposals can damage U.S. credibility only if the President presents an alarmist and misleading interpretation of them to the world.

Thirdly, House and Senate Republicans are trying to prevent some of the worst foreign policy mistakes of the Clinton Administration from repeating themselves. This, too, has nothing to do with promoting isolationism but everything to do with trying to preserve U.S. credibility abroad. The desire to curb U.S. participation in U.N. peacekeeping operations flows directly from congressional dissatisfaction with the Clinton Administration's inept handling of the operation in Somalia. This failure and the flip-flops in Bosnia, Haiti, and elsewhere, have embarrassed the U.S. and cast doubt on America's credibility as a world leader. Preventing a recurrence of such mistakes would go a long way toward restoring some of the credibility lost during the Clinton presidency.

## **CLINTON'S STRATEGIC RETREAT: THE DECLINE OF AMERICAN MILITARY POWER**

Lake is alarmed that America may be on the "brink of unilateral disarmament." This alarm is fully justified, but the reason is the Clinton Administration's military policies, not plans by Congress to cut foreign aid or restrict U.N. peacekeeping operations.

On the heels of cuts that have reduced defense budget authority by about 40 percent in real terms since 1985, Clinton's fiscal 1996 defense request would impose an additional 9 percent through Fiscal Year 1999. The results will be lower troop morale, weaker combat readiness, inadequate weapons modernization, and less research on high-tech weaponry. However, the most serious problem with Clinton's defense policy is that his proposed budget will not fund the force he says the country needs to defend itself. The planned Clinton force will be underfunded over five years by around \$110 billion. Therefore, without additional funding, the U.S. will not possess a force capable of meeting even the Administration's own relatively low requirements.

If these defense budget trends continue, the U.S. eventually will be forced to write off either Europe or Asia as a region it is able to defend. Under the Clinton budget, the U.S. would be hard pressed to win even one major regional conflict. Under no circumstances could it win two regional conflicts "nearly simultaneously," as promised in the Administration's Bottom-Up Review of defense requirements.

In short, Clinton's defense budget will lead not only to "unilateral disarmament," to use Lake's phrase, but to a strategic retreat from military commitments overseas as well. Unable to make good on these commitments, the U.S. will be forced to withdraw many of its forces from overseas. Unable to rely on the U.S., America's allies in turn will have to establish new security arrangements, in some cases accommodating themselves

to enemies of the United States. Allies also may have to rearm, possibly with nuclear weapons. Vast regions of the world will be abandoned to the spheres of influence of other powers such as China or Russia. American influence and power in the world will wane. The American Century will be over.

Nothing—not foreign aid, not participating in U.N. peacekeeping operations—demonstrates seriousness about international affairs more clearly and convincingly than commitment to remaining a global military power. As Malcolm Wallop so aptly says, “A foreign policy without a military capability is but a prayer.”<sup>3</sup> Without a global military capability, the U.S. inevitably must fall back to a more isolationist foreign policy. Unable to protect its allies and serve as a force for peace and stability, the U.S. will lose its ability to exert influence. As a result, it will find its allies less cooperative and more untrustworthy, its enemies more assertive, and the world more inhospitable to U.S. interests and values.

## CLINTON FANS THE FIRES OF PROTECTIONISM

The Clinton Administration also ignores the isolationist implications of its international trade policies. It has threatened to impose unilateral trade sanctions against Japan unless Japan agrees to purchasing quotas for U.S. automobiles and auto parts. The Japanese have vowed to take their case to the World Trade Organization if Washington proceeds with sanctions. The U.S. and Japan, two long-time allies and the keys to peace and security in Asia, are on the verge of a trade war.

Until now, the Clinton Administration has had a mixed but relatively good record in supporting free trade. Its support for the North American Free Trade Agreement was exemplary. However, the Administration’s trade policy has been schizophrenic. Toward Latin America and with respect to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), Clinton has been a free trader; toward Japan, he has consistently pursued a managed trade policy. The recent U.S. threats of trade sanctions merely represent an escalation in a policy that has existed from the very beginning.

However, this is an escalation with a difference. The rhetoric from United States Trade Representative Mickey Kantor has become very heated, causing Japanese Trade Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto to remark that “Mr. Kantor is even more scary than my wife when I get home under the influence of alcohol.”<sup>4</sup>

A trade war could have devastating consequences. Anti-Japanese feelings already are fairly strong in the United States. A recent poll taken by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations indicates that 62 percent of Americans believe economic competition from Japan represents a “critical threat” to the United States.<sup>5</sup> A trade war would add fuel to the fire, drowning out more sensible voices calling attention to the strategic importance

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3 Senator Malcolm Wallop, “Keeping America Great: Toward a New Foreign Policy Doctrine,” *Heritage Lecture* No. 526, April 22, 1995.

4 “U.S.-Japan car talks run out of road,” *Financial Times*, May 8, 1995.

5 John E. Reilly, ed., *American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy 1995* (Chicago: The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 1995), p. 21.

of the U.S.-Japanese alliance to the peace and security of Asia. Moreover, if Japan were to win its case against the U.S. in the WTO, isolationists and protectionists like Pat Buchanan and Ross Perot would be emboldened to broaden their attacks on free trade policies. The expansion of NAFTA could be stopped in its tracks, and the World Trade Organization could go the way of the League of Nations in the 1920s.

Another tragic consequence of Clinton's trade policy toward Japan could be the destruction of the U.S.-Japanese military alliance. Some Americans would question the value of a military alliance with an ally that sues the U.S. in an international trade court. Some Japanese already are questioning the need to continue the alliance with the U.S. If the U.S.-Japan alliance fell apart, a critically important strategic anchor in Asia would be lost. It would very likely be the first step in the retreat from U.S. commitments in Asia.

## **THE FRUITS OF CLINTON'S POLICY: THE WANING OF AMERICAN CREDIBILITY ABROAD**

The perception is growing abroad that America is retreating from the world stage. But the main cause is to be found not in the halls of Congress, however, but in the White House. America's friends and allies are alarmed by the ineptitude and incoherence of Bill Clinton's foreign and defense policies.

The list of diplomatic inconsistencies and mistakes is a long one:

- ✓ **BOSNIA.** Knowing that the Serbs take U.N. hostages when hit with NATO air strikes, the President pressed NATO to launch air strikes—and he did so without any backup plan. As expected, the Serbs began taking hostages and escalated the conflict. Compounding the problem, the President pledged to consider using U.S. ground troops in Bosnia, a break with past policy that caused a storm of criticism from Congress. Whatever the outcome, these actions follow repeated instances in which the President has promised greater U.S. action than is prudent or than can be sustained politically. The result: The credibility of NATO and U.S. leadership in Europe has plummeted.
- ✓ **IRAN.** The President announced a tightening of the oil embargo against Iran without first trying to line up the support of U.S. allies, a mistake which condemns the move to failure. The result: proof that America cannot lead its allies in an important diplomatic initiative.
- ✓ **NORTH KOREA.** Unable to maintain a coherent and fixed negotiating position, the Clinton Administration has been buffeted and manipulated by the North Koreans in their bid to retain their nuclear weapons program. The results: greater credibility for North Korea, more time for Pyongyang to work on its nuclear program, and doubts about U.S. leadership and credibility in Seoul and other capitals of Asia.  
**CHINA.** The Clinton Administration came into office promising to punish Chinese human rights violations with trade sanctions. When Beijing remained intransigent, the Administration backed off by offering to continue China's Most Favored Nation trading status. The results: a growing Asian perception of weak U.S. leadership and a tougher Chinese posture.

- ✓ **RUSSIA.** The Administration has vacillated between accommodation and toughness, sending mixed signals in the process. On the one hand, Clinton went to Moscow despite the bloody war in Chechnya (while snubbing London) and he looked the other way as Russia threatens to circumvent the European conventional arms treaty. On the other hand, he has threatened to cut off aid to Russia unless Moscow stops assisting the Iranians with their nuclear program. The result: doubts in Europe and Russia about American consistency and purpose.
- ✓ **JAPAN.** The entire U.S.-Japanese relationship has been reduced to the issue of trade. The overriding importance of the U.S.-Japanese military alliance in maintaining peace and stability in Asia has been obscured by the Administration's campaign to force purchasing quotas of automobile parts on Japan.

Clinton's vacillation, inconstancy, and strategic myopia have drained U.S. foreign policy of much of its credibility. They have done more than anything else to raise doubts about U.S. leadership in the world. Because President Clinton refuses to lead, American influence in the world is now more marginal than at any other time in the last 50 years. This declining influence, if continued, is a recipe for the "back door" isolationism which Clinton's own National Security Advisor seems to fear.

## **CLINTON'S IDEA OF U.S. LEADERSHIP: PROMOTING FOREIGN AID AND THE UNITED NATIONS**

The Administration's accusations of back-door isolationism rest primarily on two assumptions. The first is that foreign aid, as a major barometer of America's commitment to internationalism and engagement, is critical to U.S. leadership. The second is that criticism of the United Nations either is motivated by isolationist sentiments or could lead to isolationist consequences. According to this viewpoint, it is impossible for the U.S. to "go it alone," as some U.N. critics supposedly want, and America should work more closely with the United Nations to prevent crises from occurring.

Both of these assumptions are mistaken. Consider foreign aid. America spends about \$14 billion a year on foreign aid. In a trillion dollar economy, this is not very much. Critics cannot have it both ways, arguing on the one hand that it is "only one percent" of the federal budget, and thus should be spared from cuts, while asserting on the other that even the slightest reduction in so relatively small an amount will cast doubt on American credibility.

American credibility depends on many things: on America's military capability, its military commitments to allies, and the health of its economy. Far down the list is foreign aid. To be sure, foreign aid can be a useful tool in exercising influence abroad, but it is a very thin reed upon which to base U.S. credibility. Few countries in the world continue to demand or want foreign aid from the U.S.

Instead, most countries want more trade from the U.S. American trade and investments are far more important than foreign aid in spreading American influence. In 1992, U.S. trade with the developing world amounted to \$233 billion in imports and \$171 billion in exports. In 1993 U.S. direct investment in the developing world reached a record

\$45.5 billion. These figures pale when compared with the annual foreign aid budget of \$14 billion. U.S. trade and investments do far more than AID to promote economic development and growth in the Third World. They also do far more to spread American values and promote U.S. interests.

The most important barometer in measuring the seriousness of U.S. engagement abroad is U.S. defense capabilities. The U.S. spends around \$50 billion a year on NATO alone. No other country in the world spends more to defend its allies and maintain international peace than does the U.S. These amounts are tangible investments in peace and stability, as well as unequivocal demonstrations of the American commitment to remain involved in international affairs. U.S. defense capabilities are far more important than anything AID or the World Bank do. In fact, U.S. military power and commitments are the best foreign aid programs in the world. Far from slashing and burning the foreign aid budget, as some aid proponents have argued, the proposals by Senator Jesse Helms and other Members of Congress are designed to make foreign aid more effective by eliminating that which has failed and keeping that which has worked. The Helms proposal would ensure that foreign aid serves the national interest, promotes economic growth, and ensures that countries “graduate” from dependency on aid. Much of the aid to be cut by Congress is development assistance that has failed to promote economic growth as promised. Since security-related aid to such countries as Israel, Egypt, and Turkey is retained, it is spurious to charge that proposed aid cutoffs will damage U.S. security or America’s relations with its most important friends and allies.

The second assumption—that U.N. critics are isolationists—is equally spurious. Most conservative critics of the Clinton Administration’s U.N. policies are motivated not by some dream of returning to a fortress America, but rather by a desire to return America’s U.N. policy to what it was during the Administrations of Ronald Reagan and George Bush. Reagan and Bush viewed the U.N. as a useful tool of U.S. foreign policy and supported traditional U.N. peacekeeping efforts in such places as the Middle East, Cambodia, and El Salvador. However, by expanding the U.N. mission in Somalia, the Clinton Administration drifted away from these traditional approaches. The Clinton team wanted to get the U.S. involved in U.N. “nation-building.” This entirely new approach was very different from that pursued by the Bush Administration, which had shown how useful the U.N. could be in establishing military coalitions.

When not used properly, however, the United Nations inevitably fails. It is this failure—a failure caused mainly by the Clinton Administration’s efforts to expand the missions and activities of the U.N. in places like Somalia and Bosnia—that is undermining the U.N.’s credibility at home and abroad. In Somalia, for example, the Clinton Administration changed the Bush Administration’s limited mission of feeding starving people to “nation-building” in the middle of a bloody civil war. These efforts have done more to discredit the U.N. in the eyes of the American public than anything the congressional majority has done.

Surely there is something strange about the idea that a healthy skepticism toward a flawed institution is tantamount to isolationism. In fact, the opposite is true: Skepticism is necessary to demonstrate U.S. leadership. The U.S. should not retreat from the U.N.,

but lead it. Washington should look upon the U.N. as one of many tools in foreign policy, working with and through the U.N. to the extent that it serves the national interest. This is how internationalists such as Ronald Reagan and George Bush thought of the U.N. It is how the way the Clinton Administration should think of it as well.

## WHO IS ASSAULTING PRESIDENTIAL AUTHORITY?

In his response to the House foreign policy bill, the President accused Members of the House and Senate of launching a “frontal assault on presidential authority”<sup>6</sup> by trying to limit U.S. participation in U.N. peacekeeping operations. Their bills would require that the Administration explain not only how U.S. participation would serve the national interest, but how the U.S. would pay for it.

At the same time, however, Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole of Kansas has introduced the Peace Powers Act, which would repeal the War Powers Resolution. Representative Henry Hyde of Illinois has proposed an amendment that would do essentially the same. Both efforts are intended to reverse congressional encroachment on the authority of the President to conduct foreign policy and to perform his duties as Commander in Chief.

These plans to restore presidential authority in foreign policy at the expense of Congress fly in the face of President Clinton’s charge of “assaults” on his authority. Why would Congress try to repeal the War Powers Resolution if it is so intent on denying the President his authority to conduct foreign policy? And why is the Clinton Administration silent on repealing the War Powers Resolution if it is so concerned about presidential prerogatives? Could it be that the Administration is far more concerned about the impact of congressional actions on the United Nations than it is about presidential prerogatives in foreign policy?

There is a huge difference between the restrictions imposed by the War Powers Resolution and those found in proposed legislation on the U.N. The War Powers Resolution requires, among other things, that the President withdraw U.S. military forces with sixty days of their deployment if Congress has not voted its approval. This amounts to a congressional fiat and an improper infringement on the prerogatives of the President as Commander in Chief. The President should consult with Congress on force deployments and ask for a declaration of war to fight a major conflict, but he should also have the right to deploy forces in a national emergency to protect American lives and interests. He should not have Congress second-guessing his decision in the middle of a national crisis.

The situation is—and should be—different with respect to the “peace powers” proposed in the House and Senate bills on the United Nations. The House bill would deny funds for U.S. forces placed under U.N. command unless the President can certify that it serves the national interest. Once the President has issued an executive order certifying that it is, he can send the troops on a U.N. mission. If he cannot prove a national interest, he has no business sending U.S. troops. In addition, the President must report on the purpose of the mission, the expected size and composition of the force, the costs of the operation, and the timetable for complete withdrawal of U.S. forces involved.

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6 “Veto Aimed at Foreign Policy Bill,” *The Washington Post*, May 24, 1995



Congressional measures with respect to the War Powers Resolution and the United Nations distinguish properly between the commitment of American troops in defense of vital national interests—which Congress tried to address in the War Powers Resolution—and their participation in vaguely defined operations at the behest of a global body not subject to the U.S. Constitution. Since peacekeeping deployments are rarely urgent, it is appropriate that the decision to send U.S. troops be made only after the President consults officially with Congress. In more serious national emergencies which risk American lives and vital interests—i.e., non-peacekeeping contingencies—the President should have more leeway. Under all circumstances, the President should consult with Congress when deploying troops, and for major conflicts he should ask for a declaration of war, but his hands should not be tied by the War Powers Resolution when deploying troops in non-peacekeeping operations.

## CONCLUSION

The Clinton Administration’s rhetoric about the “isolationist proposals” from Congress is a red herring. The real danger of America’s withdrawal from the world comes not from congressional cutbacks in foreign aid or restrictions on U.S. participation in the United Nations, but from the drift and weakness of Clinton’s foreign and defense policies. America’s credibility has plummeted over the past two years because this Administration lacks a coherent national strategy to deal with the many problems facing the U.S. abroad.

The very people the President is tarring with the brush of isolationism are the ones who kept liberal neo-isolationists at bay in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and during the Persian Gulf War. These conservatives were internationalists then, and they remain internationalists to this day. They are ardent supporters of NATO expansion and a strong national defense. Many of them are strong advocates of an open and free international trade system. It is not they, but their critics from the left who will lead America to the back door of isolationism.

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